

A Roman bath house found at Carlisle Cricket Club

Kevin Mounsey of Wardell-Armstrong Archaeology, gave a talk to the Group on 11th April about the Roman Bath House at Carlisle. The Bath House was discovered beneath the old tennis courts at Carlisle Cricket Club. The club's pavilion was flooded by the Eden, December 2015 and it was subsequently decided to move it to higher ground. However the site selected was close to Hadrian's Wall and Stanwix Fort, the largest of the wall forts, built to guard the Eden bridgehead along the western route to and from Scotland. Consequently because of its potential importance, the site had to be assessed for archaeologically significant remains before construction started.

Phase I: four trenches were excavated in June 2017. A deep test pit at one end revealed Roman remains, while a medieval rubbish or cess pit with 12-13th Century Medieval pottery was unearthed in another trench. A further trench uncovered a post-medieval ground surface with Roman archaeology below at some 1.2 metres and at 2 metres in a fourth trench. A levelling floor of crushed building rubble, lime and sand with hypocaust tiles was found in the central area between these trenches, together with a concrete arch or flue of later Roman construction on 'heated' ground. A later curved wall, well preserved pillae and Roman concrete floor were also discovered with part of a quarry wall where worked stone had been removed, probably during the medieval period.

Other artefacts included bullet-shaped vaulting tiles - 30cm long x 10cm diameter tubes, each with a narrow end shaped so they could be slotted together and used to support an arching roof or dome of the bath house. This design possibly developed over 700 years, following a method used by North African potters in 300BC and was probably intended to reduce the weight of the roof, enhance insulation and stop fire outbreaks. A stoke hole and flue allowed the hot air from the fire to pass under floors of the bath house, while box tiles in the walls piped hot air through the walls. Some of the metal pins used to hold the box tiles together were found nearby. There was also evidence of flagstone and concrete floors with supporting column pillae. Tip lines could be seen in the soil section highlighting pits where material had been removed ('robbed') and later infilled with soil and rubbish.

Phase II: excavation continued in January 2018 over a larger area. A new trench uncovered a layer of dark earth formed from smoke blackened thatch, decayed weeds, timber and earth floors of medieval age, partially churned up by ploughing, mixing Roman and medieval artefacts together. This layer was removed to reveal a quern stone, oven and a capped drain flowing in the direction of the river. Large curb stones edging a road surface of cobbles may represent part of the Stanegate, a Roman road between Carlisle and Corbridge on the Tyne. One part of the site was left unexcavated because of the delicate state of the archaeology.

Several pits were found across the site. One produced finds of medieval pottery and bone. Others were used for quarrying stone initially used in the 'sub'-Roman period and again in the 12-13th centuries.

Carlisle Cricket Club is now applying for a three year Heritage Lottery Grant to continue this work. Certainly there is still much more information to be gathered about the site with its possible links to Stanwix Fort and the Stanegate. This project was funded initially by construction businessman Fred Story, as well as Carlisle City Council, and carried out by Wardell-Armstrong Archaeology.

Patricia Shaw

